

Ice Bound.

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At this time I was extremely excited and extraordinarily merry, and losing hold of my judgment began to indulge in sundry pleasantries concerning his nation and countrymen—asking, with many explosions of laughter, how it was that they continued at the trouble of building ships for us to use against them, and if he did not think the "flower de louse" a neater symbol for people who put snuff into their soap and restricted their ablutions to their faces than the tricolor, being too muddled to consider that he was ignorant of that flag; and, in short, I was so offensive, in spite of my ridiculous merriment, that his savage nature broke out. He assailed the English with every injurious term his drunken condition suffered him to recollect, and starting up, with his little eyes wildly rolling, he clapped his hand to his side, as if feeling for a sword, and, calling me by a very ugly French word, bade me come on and he would show me the difference between a Frenchman and a beast of an Englishman.

I laughed at him with all my might, which so enraged him that, swaying to right and left, he advanced as if to fall upon me. I started to my feet, and tumbled over the bench I had jumped from and lay sprawling; and the bench oversetting close to him, he kicked against it and fell too, fetching the deck a very hard blow. He groined heavily, and muttered that he was killed. I tried to rise, but my legs gave way, and then the fumes of the punch overpowered me, for I recollect no more.

When I awoke it was pitch dark. My hands, legs and feet seemed formed of ice, my head of burning brass. I thought I was in my cot, and felt with my hands till I touched Tassard's bald head, which so terrified me that I uttered a loud cry and sprang erect. Then recollection returned, and I heartily cursed myself for my folly and wickedness. Good God! thought I, that I should be so mad as to drown my senses when never was any wretch in such need of all his reason as I!

The boatwain's tinder box was in my pocket; I groped, found a candle, and lighted it. It was 3:30 in the morning. Tassard lay on his back, snoring hideously, his legs overhanging the capsize bench. I pulled and hauled at him; but he was too drunk to awake, and that he might not freeze to death, I fetched a pile of clothes out of his cabin and covered him up, and put his head on a coat.

My head ached horribly, but not worse than my heart. I went to my cabin and got into my hammock, but my head was so hot and ached so furiously, and I was so vexed with myself besides, that I could not sleep. The schooner was deathly still; there was not apparently the faintest murmur of air to awaken an echo in her; nothing spoke but the near and distant cracking of the ice. It was miserable work lying in the cabin sleepless and reproaching myself, and as my burning head robbed the cold of its formidableness, I resolved to go on deck and take a brisk turn or two.

The exercise improved my spirits; I stepped the length of the little raised deck briskly, my thoughts very busy. On a sudden the ice split on the starboard hand with a noise louder than the explosion of a twenty-four pounder. The schooner swayed to a level keel with so sharp a rise that I lost my balance and staggered. I recovered myself, trembling and greatly agitated by the noise and the movement coming together without the least hint having been given me, and, grasping a backstay, waited, not knowing what was to happen next. Unless it be the heave of an earthquake, I can imagine no motion capable of giving one such a swooning, nauseating, terrifying sensation as the rending of ice under a fixed ship. In a few moments there were several sharp cracks, all on the starboard side, like the snapping of musketry, and I felt the schooner very slightly heave; but this might have been a deception of the senses, for though I set a star against the masthead and watched it there was no movement. I looked over the side and observed that the split I had noticed on the face of the cliff had by this new rupture been extended transversely right across the schooner's starboard bow, the thither side being several feet higher than on this. It was plain that the bed on which the vessel rested had dropped so as to bring her upright, and I was convinced by this circumstance alone that if I used good judgment in disposing of the powder the weight of the mass would complete its own dislocation.

The shock did my head good; I went below and got into my cot, and after tossing for half an hour or so fell asleep. I awoke at 8 and went to the cook house, where I found Tassard preparing the breakfast and a great fire burning. I hardly knew what reception he would give me, and was therefore not a little agreeably surprised by his thanking me for covering him up.

"You have a stronger head than mine," said he; "the punch used you well. You made me laugh, though. You were very diverting."

"Ay, much too diverting to please myself," said I; and I sounded him cautiously to remark what his memory carried of my insults, but found that he recollecting nothing more than that I danced with vigor and sang well.

I said nothing about my contrition, my going on deck, and the like, contenting myself with asking if he had heard the explosion in the night.

"No," cried he, staring and looking eagerly. "Well, then," said I, "there has happened a mighty crack in the ice, and I do solemnly believe that with the blessing of God we shall be able by blasts of powder to free the block on which the schooner rests."

"Good!" cried he; "come, let us hurry with this meal. How is the weather?"

"Quiet, I believe. I have not been on deck since the explosion aroused me early this morning."

While we ate he said, "Suppose we get the schooner afloat, what do you propose?"

"Why," I answered, "if she prove tight and seaworthy, what but carry her home?"

"What! you and I alone?"

"No," said I, "certainly not; we must make shift to sail her to the nearest port, and ship a crew."

He looked at me attentively and said, "What do you mean by home?"

"England," said I.

He shrugged his shoulders, and exclaimed in French: "This natural!" then proceeding in English: "Pray," said he, showing his fangs, "do not you know that the Boco del Dragon is a pirate? Do you want to be hanged, that you propose to carry her to a port to ship men?"

"I have no fear of that," said I; "after all these years she'll be as clean forgotten as if she had never had existence."

"Look ye here, Mr. Rodney," cried he, in a passion, "let's have no more of this sniveling nonsense about years. You may be as mad as you please on that point, but it shan't hang me. It needs more than a few months

to make men forget a craft that has carried on such traffic as our hold represents. You'll not find me venturing myself nor the schooner into any of your ports for men. No, no, my friend. I am in no stupor now, you know; and I've slept the punch off also, d'ye see? What! betray our treasure, and lose the good of our generosity?"

He made me an ironical bow, grinning with wrath.

"Let's get the schooner afloat first," said I. "Ay, that's all very well," he cried; "but better stop here than dangle in chains. No, my friend; our plan must be a very different one from your proposal. I suppose you want your share of the booty?" said he, snapping his fingers.

"I deserve it," said I, smiling; "that I might often have said."

"And yet you would convey the most noted pirate of the age, with plunder in her to the value of thousands of doubloons, to a port in which we should doubtless find ships of war, a garrison, magistrates, governors, prisons, and the whole of the machinery it is our business to give our stern to! Ma foi, Mr. Rodney, surely you are out in something more than your reckoning of time?"

"What do you propose?" said I.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, while his little eyes twinkled with cunning, "now you speak sensibly. What do I propose? This, my friend. We must navigate the schooner to an island and bury the treasure; then head for the shipping highways, and obtain help from any friendly merchantman we may fall in with. Home with us means the Tortugas. There we shall find the company we need to recover for us what we shall have hidden. We shall come by our own then. But to sail with this treasure on board—without a crew to defend the vessel—by this hand! the first cruiser that sighted us would make a clean sweep, and then he for the hangman, Mr. Rodney!"

How much I relished this scheme you will imagine; but to reason with him would have been mere madness. I knitted my brows and seemed to reflect, and then said: "Well, there is a great deal of plain, good sense in what you say. I certainly see the wisdom of your advice in recommending that we should bury the treasure. Nor must we leave anything on board to convict the ship of her true character."

His greedy eyes sparkled with self-complacency. He tapped his forehead and cried: "Trust to this! There is mind behind this surface. Your plan for releasing the schooner is great; mine for preserving the treasure is great too. You are the sailor, I the strategist; by combining our genius we shall oppose an invulnerable front to adversity, and must end our days as princes. Your hand, Paul!"

I laughed and gave him my hand, which he squeezed with many contortions of face and figure; but, though I laughed, I don't know that I ever so much disliked and distrusted and feared the old leering rogue as at that moment.

"Come!" cried I, jumping up, "let's get about our work." And with that I pulled open a bag of matches and fell to testing them. They burned well. The fire ate into them as smoothly as if they had been prepared the day before. They were all of one thickness. I cut them to equal lengths, and fired them, and waited, watch in hand; one was burned out two minutes before the other, and each length took about ten minutes to consume. This was good enough to base my calculations upon.

CHAPTER XXI.

WE EXPLODE THE MINES.

I don't design to weary you with a close account of our proceedings. How we opened the main deck hatch, rigged up tackles, clapping purchases on the falls, as the captain was hard frozen and immovable; how we hoisted the powder barrels on deck, and then by tackles on the foreyard lowered them over the side; how we filled a number of bags which we found in the forecabin with powder; how we measured the cracks in the ice, and saved a couple of spare studdingsails to be used as lengths to serve as beams whereby to poise the barrels and bags—would make but sailor's talk, half of which would be unintelligible and the rest wearisome.

The Frenchman worked hard, and we snatched only half an hour for our dinner. The split that had happened in the ice during the night showed by daylight as a gulf between eight and ten feet wide at the seaward end, thinning to a width of three feet, never less, to where it ended, ahead of the ship, in a hundred cracks in the ice that showed as if a thunderbolt had fallen just there. I looked into this rent, but it was as black as a well past a certain depth and there was no gleam of water. When we went over the side to roll our first barrel of powder to the spot where we meant to lower it, the Frenchman marched up to the figure of Trenton, and, with no more reverence than a boy would show in throwing a stone at a jackass, tumbled him into the chasm. He then stepped up to the body of the Portuguese boatwain, dragged him to the same fissure and rolled him into it.

"There!" cried he; "now they are properly buried."

And with this he went coolly on with his work. I said nothing, but was secretly heartily disgusted with this brutal disposal of his miserable shipmates' remains. However, it was his doing, not mine; and I confess the removal of those silent witnesses was a very great relief to me, albeit when I considered how Tassard had been awakened and how both the mate and the boatwain might have been brought to by treatment, I felt as though after a manner the Frenchman had committed a murder by burying them so.

We got our supper and sat smoking and discussing our situation and chances. Tassard was tired, and this and our contemplation of the probabilities of the morrow sobered his mind, and he talked with a certain gravity. He drank sparingly and forbore the hideous revellations or inventions he was used to bestow on me, and indeed could find nothing to talk about but the explosion and what it was to do for us. I was very glad he did not again refer to his project to bury the treasure and carry the schooner to the Tortugas. The subject fired his blood, and it was such nonsense that the mere naming of it was nauseous to me. Eight and forty years had passed since his ship fell in with the ice, and not tenfold the treasure in the hold might have purchased for him the sight of so much as a single bone of the youngest of those associates whom he idly dreamed of seeking and shipping and sailing in command of. Yet imbecile as was his scheme, having regard to the half century that had elapsed, I clearly witnessed the meanness to me that it implied. His views were to be read as plainly as if he had delivered them. First and foremost, he meant that I should help him to sail the schooner to an island and bury the plate and money—which done he would take the first opportunity to murder me. His chance of meeting with a ship that would lend him assistance to navigate the schooner would be as good if he were alone in her as if I were on board too. There would be nothing, then, in this consideration to hinder him from cutting my throat after we had buried the treasure and were got north. Two motives would imperatively urge him to make away with me; first, that I should not be able to serve as a witness to his being a pirate; and, next, that he alone should possess the secret of the treasure.

He little knew what was passing in my

mind as we were passing through the curls of smoke spouting up from his death's head pipe. I talked easily and confidentially; but I saw in his gaze the eyes of my murderer, and was so sure of his intentions that had I shot him in self defense he sat there, I am certain my conscience would have acquitted me of his blood.

I passed two most uneasy hours in my cot before closing my eyes. I could think of nothing but how to secure myself against the Frenchman's treachery. You would suppose that my mind must have been engrossed with considerations of the several possibilities of the morrow; but that was not so. My reflections ran wholly to the bald headed, evil eyed pirate whom in an evil hour I had thrust into being, and who was like to discharge the debt of his own life by taking mine. The truth is, I had been too hard at work all day—too full of the business of planning, cutting, testing and contriving—to find leisure to dwell upon what he had said at breakfast; and now that I lay alone in darkness, it was the only subject I could settle my thoughts to.

However, next morning I found myself less gloomy, thanks to several hours of solid sleep. I thought: What is the good of anticipating? Suppose the schooner is crushed by the ice, or becomes jammed in consequence of the explosion? Until we are under way—may, until the treasure is buried—I have nothing to fear, for the rogue cannot do without me. And, reassuring myself in this fashion, I went to the cook room and lighted the fire; my companion presently arrived, and we sat down to our morning meal.

We breakfasted in silence, and then I rose, saying: "Let us now see what the gunpowder is going to do for us."

The wind, as before, was in the southwest, blowing without much weight, but the sky was overcast with great masses of white clouds, with a tint of rainbows in their shoulders and skirts, amid which the sky showed a clear liquid blue. Those clouds seemed to promise wind, and perhaps snow, anon; but there was nothing to hinder our operations. We got upon the ice and went to work to fix matches to the barrels and bags, and to sling them by the beams we had contrived, ready for lowering when the matches were fired, and this occupied us the best part of two hours. When all was ready I fired the first match, and we lowered the barrel smartly to the scope of line we had settled upon; so with the others. You may reckon we worked with all imaginable wariness, for the stuff we handled was mighty deadly; and if a barrel should fall and burst, with the match alight, we might be blown in an instant into rags, it being impossible to tell how deep the rents went.

The bags being lighter, there was less to fear; and presently all the barrels and bags, with the matches burning, were poised in the places and hanging at the depth we had fixed upon, and we then returned to the schooner—the Frenchman breaking into a run and tumbling over the rail, in his alarm, with the dexterity of a monkey.

Each match was supposed to burn an hour, so that when the several explosions happened they might all occur as nearly as possible at once, and we had therefore a long time to wait. The margin may look unreasonable in the face of our dispatch; but you will not think it unnecessary if you consider that our machinery might not have worked very smooth, and that meanwhile all that was lowered was in the way of exploding. So interminable a period as now followed I do believe never entered before into the experience of a man. The cold was intense, and we had to move about; but also were we repeatedly coming to a halt to look at our watches and cast our eyes over the ice. It was like standing under a gallows with the noose around the neck, waiting for the cart to move off. My own suspense became torture; but I commanded my face. The Frenchman, on the other hand, could not control the torments of his expectation and fear.

"Holy Virgin!" he would cry, "suppose we are blown up too! suppose we are engulfed in the ice! suppose it should be vomited up in vast blocks, which in falling upon us must crush us to pulp and smash the decks in!"

It was three or four minutes past the hour, and I was looking breathlessly at my watch when the first of the explosions took place. Before the ear could well receive the shock of the blast the whole of the barrels exploded, along with some twelve or fourteen parcels. Tassard, who stood beside me, fell on his face, and I believed he had been killed. It was so hellish a thunder that I suppose the blowing up of a first rate could not make a more frightful roar of noise. A kind of twilight was caused by the rise of the volumes of white smoke out of the ice. The schooner shook with such a convulsion that I was persuaded she had been split. Vast showers of splinters of ice fell as if from the sky, and rained like arrows through the smoke; but if there were any great blocks upheaved they did not touch the ship. Meanwhile the other barrels were exploding in their places, sometimes two and three at a time, sending a sort of sickening spasm and throes through the fabric of the vessel, and you heard the most extraordinary grinding noises rising out of the ice all about, as though the mighty rupture of the powder cracked through leagues of the island. I durst not look forth till all the powder had burst. I should be struck by some flying piece of ice; but unless the schooner was injured below she was as sound as before, and in exactly the same posture, as if afloat in harbor, only that of course her stern lay low with the slope of her bed.

I called to Tassard, and he lifted his head. "Are you hurt?" said I.

"No, no," he answered, "Tis a Spaniard's trick to fling down to a broadside. Body of St. Joseph, what a furious explosion!" and so saying he crawled into the companion and spat beside me. "What has it done for us?"

"I don't know yet," said I, "but I believe the schooner is unharmed. That was a powerful shock!" I cried, as a half dozen of bags blew up together in the crevices deep down.

The thunder and tumult of the roaring ice, accompanied by the heavy explosion of the gunpowder, so dulled the hearing that it was difficult to speak. That the mines had accomplished our end was not yet to be known; but there could not be the least doubt that they had not only occasioned tremendous ruptures low down in the ice, but that the volcanic influence was extending far beyond its first effects by making one split produce another, one weak part give way and create other weaknesses, and so on, all round about us and under our keel, as was clearly to be gathered by the shivering and spasms of the schooner, and by the growls, roars, blasts and huddles of terrifying sounds which arose from the frozen floor.

It was twenty minutes after the hour at which the mines had been framed to explode when the last parcel burst; but we waited another quarter of an hour to make sure that it was the last, during all which time the growling and roaring noises deep down continued, as if there was a battle of a thousand lions raging in the vaults and hollows underneath. The smoke had been settled away by the wind, and the prospect was clear. We ran below to see to the fire and revive five minutes of heat into our chilled bodies, and then returned to view the scene.

I looked first over the starboard side, and saw the great split that had happened in the night torn places into immense yawns and gulfs by the fall of vast masses of rock out of its sides, but what most delighted me was

the hollow sound of washing water. I lifted my hand and listened.

"Tis the swell of the sea flowing into the opening!" I exclaimed.

"That means," said Tassard, "that this side of the block is dislocated from the main." "Yes," cried I, "and if the powder ahead of the bows has done its work, the heave of the ocean will do the rest."

We made our way on to the forecabin over a deep bed of splinters of ice, lying like wood shavings upon the deck; and I took notice as I walked that every glorious crystal pendant that had before adorned the yards, rigging and spars had been shaken off. I had expected to see a wonderful spectacle of havoc in the ice where the barrels of gunpowder had been poised; but saving many scores of cracks where none was before, and vast ragged gashes in the mouths of the crevices down which the barrels had been lowered, the scene was much as heretofore.

The Frenchman stared, and exclaimed, "What has the powder done? I see only a few cracks."

"What it may have done I don't know," I answered; "but depend on it such heavy charges of powder must have burst to some purpose. The dislocation will be below, and so much the better, for 'tis there the ice must come asunder if this block is to go free."

He gazed about him, and then rapping out a string of oaths—English, Italian, and French, for he swore in all the languages he spoke, which, he once told me, were five—he declared that for his part he considered the powder wasted, that he'd have done as well to fling a hand grenade into a fissure; that a thousand barrels of powder would be but as a popgun for rending the schooner's bed from the main; and, in short, with several insulting looks and a face black with rage and disappointment, gave me very plainly to know that I had not only played the fool myself, but had made a fool of him, and that he was heartily sorry he had ever given himself any trouble to contrive the cursed mines or to assist me in a ridiculous project that might have resulted in blowing the schooner to pieces and ourselves with it.

I glanced at him with a sneer, but took no further notice of his insolence. It was not only that he was so contemptible in all respects—a liar, a rogue, a thief, a poltroon, hoary in twenty walks of vice—there was something so unearthly about a creature that had been as good as dead for eight and forty years that it was impossible anything he could say could affect me as the rancorous tongue of another man would. I feared and hated him, because I knew that in intent he was already my assassin; but the mere insolence of so incredible a creature could not but find me imperturbable.

"There is nothing to be seen by staring," he exclaimed presently, speaking very solemnly. "I am hungry and freezing, and shall go below!" And with that he turned his back and made off, growling in his throat as he went.

I got upon the ice and stepped very carefully to the starboard side, and looked down the vast split there. The sea in consequence of the slope did not come so far, but I could hear the wash of the water very plain. It was certain that the valley in which we lay was wholly disconnected from the main ice on this side. I passed to the larboard quarter, and here too were cracks wide and deep enough to satisfy me that its hold was weak. It was forward of the bows, where the barrels had been exploded, that the ice was thickest and had the firmest grasp; but its surface was violently and heavily cracked by the explosions, and I thought to myself if the fissures below are as numerous, then certainly the swell of the sea ought to fetch the whole mass away. But I was now half frozen myself and pining for warmth. It was after 1 o'clock. The wind was piping freshly, and the great heavy clouds in swarms drove stately across the sky.

"It may blow to-night," thought I, "and if the wind hangs as it is just such a sea as may do our business well by setting run." And thus musing, I entered the ship and went below.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CHANGE COMES OVER THE FRENCHMAN.

Tassard was dogged and scowling. Such was his temper that had I been a small or weak man, or a person likely to prove submissive, he would have given a loose rein to his foul tongue and may be handled me very roughly. But my demeanor was cold and resolved, and not of a kind to improve his courage. I leveled a deliberate, semi-contemptuous gaze at his own fiery stare, and puzzled him, too, I believe, a good deal by my cool reserve. He muttered while we ate, drinking plentifully of wine and garnishing his draughts with oaths and to spare; and then, after falling silent and remaining so for the space of twenty minutes, during which I lighted my pipe and sat with my feet close to the furnace, listening with eager ears to the sounds of the ice and the dull crying of the wind, he exclaimed sulkily: "Your scheme is a failure. The schooner is fixed. What's to be done now?"

"I don't know that my scheme is a failure," said I. "What did you suppose—that the blast would blow the ice, with the schooner on it, into the ocean clear of the island? If the ice is so shaken as to enable the swell to detach it, my scheme will have accomplished all I proposed."

"If!" he cried, scornfully and passionately; "if will not deliver us and save the treasure. I tell you the schooner is fixed—as fixed as the damned in everlasting fire. Be it so!" he cried, clenching his fist. "But you must meddle no more! The Boco del Dragon is mine—mine, d'ye see, now that they're all dead and gone but me!"—smiling his boom—"and if ever she is to float, let nature or the devil launch her; no more explosion, with the risks your failure has made her and me run!"

His voice sank; he looked at me in silence, and then, with a wild grin of anger, he exclaimed: "What made you awake me? I was at peace—neither cold, hungry nor hopeless! What demon forced you to bring me to this—to bring me back to this?"

"Mr. Tassard," said I, coldly, "I don't ask your pardon for my experiment; I meant well, and to my mind it is no failure yet. But for disturbing your repose I do sincerely beg your forgiveness, and solemnly promise you, if you will return to the state in which I found you, that I will not repeat the offense."

He eyed me from top to toe in silence, filled and lighted his hideous pipe, and smoked with his back turned upon me.

Had there been another warm place in the schooner I should have retired to it, and left this surly and scandalous savage to the enjoyment of his own company.

After sitting a long while sullenly smoking in silence, he fetched his mattress and some covers, lay down upon it, and fell fast asleep. I admired and envied this display of confidence in me, and heartily wished myself as safe in his hands as he was in mine. The afternoon passed. I was on deck a half dozen times, but never witnessed the least alteration in the ice. My spirits sank very low.

I sat before the furnace extremely dejected, while the Frenchman snored on his mattress. I could no longer flatter myself that the explosions had made the impression I had expected on the ice, and my mind was utterly at a loss. How to deliver myself from this horrible situation I could not imagine.

The sole ray of hope that gleamed upon me

broke out of the center that this island was going north, and that when we had come to the height of the summer in these seas, the wasting of the coast or the dislocation of the northern mass would release us.

Yet this was but poor comfort too; it threatened a terrible long spell of waiting, with perhaps disappointment in the end, and months of enforced association with a wretch with whom I should have to live in fear of my life.

When I was getting supper Tassard awoke, quitted his mattress and came to his bench.

"Has anything happened while I slept?" said he.

"Nothing," I answered.

"The ice shows no signs of giving?" he asked.

"I see none," said I.

"Well," cried he, with a sarcastic sneer, "have you any more fine schemes?"

"Tis your turn now," I replied. "Try your hand. If you fail I promise you I shall not be disappointed."

"But you English sailors," said he, wagging his head and regarding me with a great deal of wildness in his eye, "speak of yourselves as the finest seamen in the world. Justify the maritime reputation of your nation by showing me how we are to escape with the schooner from the ice."

"Mr. Tassard," said I, approaching him and looking him full in the face, "I would advise you to sweeten your temper and change your tone. I have borne myself very moderately toward you, submitted to your insults with patience, and have done you some kindness. I am not afraid of you. On the contrary, I look upon you as a swaggering, billy and hoary villain. Do you understand me? I am a desperate man in a desperate situation. But if I don't fear death, depend upon it I don't fear you; and I take God to witness that if you do not use me with the civility I have the right to expect, I will kill you!"

My temper had given way; I meant every word I spoke, and my air and sternity rendered my speech very formidable. I approached him by another stride; he started up, as I thought, to flee me, but in reality to recoil, and this he did so effectively at to tumble over his bench, and down he fell, striking his bald head so hard that he lay for several minutes motionless.



My temper had given way.

I stood over him till he chose to sit erect, which he presently did, rubbing his pit and looking at me with an air of mingled bewilderment and fear.

"This is sorry usage to give a shipmate in distress," said he. "Old's life, man! I had thought there was some sense of humor in you. Your hand, Mr. Rodney—I feel jaded!"

I helped him to rise, and he then sat down in a somewhat rickety manner, rubbing his eyes. It might have been fancy, it might have been the illusion of the furnace light combined with the venerable appearance his long hair and naked pate gave him, but I thought in those few minutes he had grown to look twenty years older.

"Never concern yourself about my humor, Mr. Tassard," said I, preserving my determined air and coming close to him again. "How is it to stand between us? I leave the choice to you. If you will treat me civilly you'll not find me wanting in every disposition to render our miserable state tolerable; but if you insult me, use me injuriously, and act the pirate over me, who am an honest man, by God, Mr. Tassard, I will kill you!"

He stooped away from me and raised his hand in a posture as if to fend me off, and cried, in a whining manner: "I lost my head—this gunpowder business hath been a foolish disappointment—look you, Mr. Rodney, come! We will drink a can to our future amity!"

I answered coldly that I wanted no more wine, and bade him beware of me; that he had gone far enough; that our hideous condition had filled my soul with desperation and misery, and that I would not have my life on this frozen schooner made more abominable than it was by his swagger, lies and insults; and I added, in a loud voice and in a menacing manner, that death had no terrors for me, and that I would dispatch him with as little fear as I should meet my doom, whatever shape it took.

I marched on deck, not a little astounded by the cowardice of the old rascal, and very well pleased with the marked impression my bearing and language had produced on him. Not that I supposed for a moment that his bold comportment would save me from his knife or his pistol when he should think proper to make away with me. No. All I reckoned upon was cowering him into a cowering posture of mind, and checking his aggressions and insolence.

I stayed but a minute or two on deck, such was the cold that I do not know I had ever felt it more biting and bitter.

I returned below and sat down. The Frenchman asked me no questions. He had his can in the oven and his death's head in his great hand, and puffed out clouds of smoke of the color of his beard, and indeed in the candle and fire light looked like a figure of old Time, with his long nose and bald head. I addressed one or two civil remarks to him, which he answered in a subdued manner, discovering no resentment whatever that I could trace in his eyes or the expression of his countenance; and being wishful to show that I bore no malice I talked of pirates and their usages, and asked if the Boco del Dragon fought under the red or black flag.

"Why, the black flag, certainly," said he; "but if we met with resistance it was our custom to haul it down and hoist the red flag, to let our opponents know we should give no quarter."

"Where is your flag locker?" said I.

"In my berth," he answered.

"I should like to see the black flag," I exclaimed; "tis the one piece of hunting, I believe, I have never viewed."

"I'll fetch it," said he, and taking the lantern went off very quietly, but with a certain stagger in his walk, which I should have put down to the wine if it was not that his behavior was free from all symptoms of inebriation. The change in him surprised me, but not so greatly as you might suppose; indeed, it excited my suspicions rather than my wonder. Fear worked in him unquestionably; but what I seemed to see best was some malignant design which he hoped to conceal by an air of conciliation and a quality of respectful docility.

He came back with a flag in his hand, and we spread it between us. It was black, with a yellow skull grinning in the middle; over this an hour glass, and beneath a cross bone.

"What consternation has this signal caused and does still cause!" said I, surveying it, while a hundred fancies of the barbarous scenes it had flown over, the miserable cries for mercy that had swept up past it to the ear of God, crowded into my mind. "I think, Mr. Tassard," said I, "that our first step, should we ever find ourselves afloat in this ship, must be to commit this and all other flags of a like kind on board to the deep. There is evidence in this piece of drapery to hang an angel!"

He let fall his end of the flag, and sat down sulkily.

"Yes," he answered, sending a curious rolling glance around the cook room, and at the same time bringing his hand to the back of his head, "this is evidence to dangle over an honest man than you, sir. All flags but the ensign we resolve to sail under must go—all flags, and all the wearing apparel, and—ah—but—here he muttered a curse—"we are fixed; there is to be no sailing."

He shook his head and covered his eyes. His manner was strange, and the stranger for his quietude.

I said to him, "Are you ill?"

If he heard he did not heed me, but fell a muttering and crying to himself. And now I did certainly remark a quality in his voice that was new to my ear; it was not, as he had said, a labor or thickness of utterance, but a dryness and parchedness of old age, with many breaks from high to low notes, and a lean noise of dribbling threatening death—but this was from sheer terror; he did not swoon, but sat with a stoop, often pressing his brows and gazing about him like one whose senses are all abroad.

"Gracious mother of all angels!" he exclaimed, crossing himself several times, but with a feeble, most agitated hand, and speaking in French and English, and sometimes interjecting an invocation in Italian or Spanish, though I gave you what he said in my own tongue—"Surely I am dying! Oh Lord, how frightful to die! Oh lady Virgin, be merciful to me! I shall go to hell. Oh Jesu, I am past forgiveness! For the love of heaven, Mr. Rodney, some brandy! Oh, that some saint would interpose for me! Only a few years longer—grant me a few years longer—I beseech for that time that I may repent!" and he extended one quivering hand for the brandy (of which a draught stood melted in the oven), and made the sign of the cross upon his breast with the other, while he continued to whine out in his cracked pipes the wildest appeals for mercy, saying a vast deal that I durst not venture to set down,